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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000281

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/PMBS,INR/EAP, USIP - SOLOMON

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TAGS: [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [MY](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: GRP AND MILF EXPECT TALKS SOON, WILL COOPERATE ON
CRIMINAL INTERDICTION

REF: A. MANILA 142

[B](#). 03 MANILA 6020

Classified By: Political Officer Joseph Saus
for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) GRP and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) sources confirmed both sides are ready for another round of talks tentatively slated for the first week of February. The sides are prepared to discuss the nettlesome ancestral domain issue. The cease-fire remains strong despite the January 9 clash that left almost 20 dead on both sides. The GRP plans to pursue criminally the MILF commander responsible, whose activities the MILF leadership did not sanction. Both GRP and MILF officials note the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG), currently in its formative stages, could be used in the future to avert similar incidents by arresting commanders who operate outside MILF command and control. The GRP intends to coordinate a list with the MILF of high priority targets that may include terrorists and criminals. In "hot pursuit" of such targets, the GRP is not obligated to give prior notice to MILF counterparts. End Summary.

More Progress Reported

2. (SBU) At a January 19 briefing to the Manila Diplomatic Corps held at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Secretary Silvestre Afable, Chief GRP Negotiator with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), said both the GRP and MILF expect to hold another round of exploratory talks the first week of February. Both sides have formulated their respective positions on identifying historic Muslim territory, known as ancestral domain, although Afable was reluctant to elaborate in a public setting.

3. (SBU) Afable provided a very positive assessment of the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) and the joint GRP-MILF Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH) -- both charged with cease-fire monitoring. Afable also highlighted the role of Joint Monitoring Teams -- with representatives from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), MILF combatants, and a local cease-fire monitoring NGO called "Bantay Ceasefire" (Ceasefire Guard) -- as crucial in some of the more conflict-affected areas. The CCCH also has small "Local Monitoring Teams" (LMTs) (with representatives from the GRP, MILF, NGOs, and the religious sectors) in 13 provinces throughout Mindanao. The LMTs monitor the day-to-day status of the cease-fire at the community level.

Cease-Fire Lauded

4. (SBU) Afable noted a dramatic decline in armed skirmishes since the AFP's Buliok offensive in February 2003 and the reactivation of the CCCH the following July. He said from January to July 2003, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) recorded 528 skirmishes. Only 31 incidents were reported until December 2003. In all of 2004, OPAPP recorded 71 incidents.

Cooperation Results From Isolated Skirmish

5. (SBU) Afable characterized the recent clashes in Maguindanao as "isolated incidents." At the DFA briefing, poloff received a document detailing the January 9 clashes. The report said as many as 300 armed MILF elements under Commander Ustadz Abdul Wahid Tundok attacked a nine-man AFP detachment. After a day of fighting, the AFP retook the detachment. Six soldiers were killed with one soldier exhibiting evidence of torture. Thirteen MILF fighters were killed, according to the report.

6. (SBU) During an earlier January 13 press conference after a CCCH meeting on the incident, Brigadier General Alexander Yano, Chief of the GRP delegation to the CCCH, said the GRP will pursue Wahid and fellow commander Abdurakman Bides Binago as common criminals. The outgoing MILF representative

to the CCCH, Benjie Midtimbang (to be replaced by Von al-Haq), was less direct. Reading from an official memo from the Chief of Staff of MILF forces, he said the MILF leadership "does not sanction the (January 9) engagement of Commander Wahid." He also reiterated MILF support for the cease-fire and for all MILF commanders to report to MILF military headquarters.

17. (C) On January 18, MILF technical advisor, Attorney Musib Buat said the skirmish resulted from a "personal grudge" between Binago and "a group that attacked his brother" (ref A). He added the MILF continues to investigate the incident and the commander in question. He also said the 72-hour deadline placed by the AFP for Wahid to surrender would not allow the MILF to complete its investigation.

18. (SBU) At the DFA briefing Afable told poloff that the long awaited Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) could be used in searching for and eventually arresting maverick commanders such as Wahid. In the future, the GRP and the MILF will coordinate on a list of "high priority targets." He stressed that Wahid would be held responsible for the soldiers' deaths and would be included on the list. Notably, Afable said that in cases of high priority targets, the AFP and PNP do not need to give prior notice to the MILF in "hot pursuit" operations.

19. (C) Comment: The AHJAG finally has momentum behind it -- the most to date since it was conceptualized in an August 2002 GRP-MILF joint communiqu . Nonetheless the AHJAG is still being formulated and is not yet operational. The fact that a coordinated list of wanted "criminals" (to include terrorists such as the Jemmah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf Group) will circulate among the AFP, PNP, and MILF leadership is welcome news. The MILF appears to be working with the GRP on this score, but remains careful not to appear excessively accommodating to the GRP side -- likely to sustain the loyalty of its rank-and-file who view Manila with suspicion. We will track and encourage the formation of the AHJAG as a vital tool in clearing criminals and terrorists from MILF ranks. End Comment.

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